

# EDITORIAL

## "Gone to Earth."

THE book to which REBECCA WEST directed attention in the London despatch printed in *Books and the Book World* for April 14 was *Gone to Earth*, by MARY WEBB, published in the United States by E. P. Dutton & Co. It lies here on the table beside us. Let us recall what Miss WEST, herself the author of a distinguished novel, said about it:

"The year's discovery has been MARY WEBB, author of *Gone to Earth*. She is a genius and I shouldn't mind wagering that she is going to be the most distinguished writer of our generation."

*Gone to Earth* is not a first novel. There were one or two earlier books—one called *The Golden Arrow*. We must look that up and read it; or no, perhaps it were better not to, for *Gone to Earth* may so greatly transcend the earlier volume as to make it negligible.

Our indecision on this point is entirely typical of the whirl in which *Gone to Earth* has left us, a bewildering mental turmoil, a confusion of inner voices like the mighty murmur of talk and exclamation that bursts out in an audience after the performance of a piece of matchless music.

Everywhere acclaim; among all the inner voices not one that does not praise in sharpest accents of delight; the verdict, the complex verdict of personal thought and personal feeling, is completely in support of Miss WEST's pronouncement.

## An Impressive Novel.

*Gone to Earth* is the most impressive English novel since THOMAS HARDY gave us *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. It has many points of resemblance to *Tess*. The chief of these is its possession of the great secret of tragedy, mastered by the Greeks and lost and reconquered in these later years only in a few solitary instances.

That secret was called by the Greeks katharsis, and it is best described by saying that when a book or play has this precious attribute you cannot read the book or witness the play without a spiritual purging by pity and terror. The pity is a compassion as nearly divine as man may feel; the terror is a terror which does not rob self-respect but strengthens it, that fills with awe, with humility; that makes men unafraid to die, that even makes them brave enough to face the severest task of living.

Now such thoughts and feelings as the Greek katharsis implies cannot be roused by any mere tale, however well told, however realistic and veritable, however clever or convincing or beautiful or sad or emotionally stirring. These thoughts and feelings can only be excited by a great simplicity of mind and heart in the story teller, by his or her possession of a profound, a terrible sense of the proportions of things, of the littleness of man in a starry universe, of the greatness of man in a single human soul.

A story teller who possesses this simplicity of the mind and heart can see the hand of God in a sparrow's fall and can by pure genius make you see it too. Genius; no amount of talent can do it; no labor of patient art, no refinement of taste and learning. A gift is required, a gift from the Immortals. And with this gift the possessor of it has no choice but to proceed to its exercise.

## Predictions.

In the case of THOMAS HARDY the gift was bestowed for the writing of a single tale. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* exhibits no marvellous literary style, but it will live and burn into the hearts of mankind when all of GEORGE MEREDITH, yes, even the lyric splendor of *Richard Feverel*, is forgotten. DICKENS will perish, and *Tess* will still be read. FLAUBERT will become a ghostly name, but *Tess* will be a living portent. *The Egoist*? It stings, it flays; but Sir WILLOUGHBY PATTERNE will be a shadow traced in the dust of men's minds before they cease to shrink from HARDY's portrait of *A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented*.

## A High Lineage.

MARY WEBB is of the line of MEREDITH. In *Gone to Earth* are many Meredithian traits of style, but the fantasticalness which MEREDITH allowed himself is not present. You recall the way in which MEREDITH mounted his hippogriff and most Celtically soared skyward, do you not? He had an almost perverse love of knotting his meaning into words, phrases, sentences that are hard unsnarling. It came of his hatred for trite and hackneyed expressions. This hatred, joined to the Welsh in him, led him to verbal excesses.

From these excesses MARY WEBB is singularly free. Only in her descriptive sentences, her brief passages describing life outdoors, does she permit herself an epigrammatic terseness and condensation.

It is a calculated economy that other writers would do well to practise. The effect can be sufficiently illustrated by the opening paragraphs of *Gone to Earth*:

"Small feckless clouds were hurried across the vast untroubled sky—shepherdless, futile, imponderable—and were torn to fragments on the fangs of the mountains, so ending their ephemeral adventures with nothing of their fugitive existence left but a few tears.

"It was cold in the Callow—a spinney of silver birches and larches that topped a round hill. A purple mist hinted of buds in the tree tops, and a fainter purple haunted the vistas between the silver and brown boles.

"Only the crudeness of youth was here as yet, and not its triumph—only the sharp calyx point, the pricking tip of the bud, like spears, and not the paten of the leaf, the chalice of the flower.

## "No Flight, No Song."

"For as yet spring had no flight, no song, but went like a half fledged bird, hopping tentatively through the undergrowth. The bright springing mercury that carpeted the open spaces had only just hung out its pale flowers, and honeysuckle leaves were still tongues of green fire. Between the larch boles and under the thickets of honeysuckle and blackberry came a tawny silent form, wearing with the calm dignity of woodland creatures a beauty of eye and limb, a brilliance of tint that few women could have worn without self-consciousness. Clear eyed, lithe, it stood for a moment in the full sunlight—a year old fox, round headed and velvet footed. Then it slid into the shadows. A shrill whistle came from the interior of the wood, and the fox bounded toward it.

"Where you bin? You'm stray and lose yourself, certain sure!" said a girl's voice, chiding motherly. "And if you'm alost, I'm alost; so come you whome. The sun's undering, and there's bones for supper!"

"With that she took to her heels, the little fox after her, racing down the Callow in the cold level light till they came to the Woodus cottage.

"HAZEL WOODUS, to whom the fox belonged, had always lived at the Callow. There her mother, a Welsh gypsy, had borne her in bitter rebellion, hating marriage and a settled life and ABEL WOODUS as a wildcat hates a cage. She was a rover, born for the artist's joy and sorrow, and her spirit found no relief for its emotions; for it was dumb. To the linnet its flight, to the thrush its song; but she had neither flight nor song. Yet the tongueless thrush is a thrush still, and has golden music in its heart. The caged linnet may sit moping, but her soul knows the dip and rise of flight on an everlasting May morning."

## Method and Characters.

That is a longish excerpt, but it has seemed worth while to give it, intact and straight from the beginning of the book, not only to illustrate MARY WEBB's descriptive power, but her directness. In a few words she gives you the opening scene, in fewer words than most dramatists require to characterize the setting of a first act. Immediately an invisible curtain ascends and a principal character comes quietly upon the stage; the voice of HAZEL WOODUS is heard and we have a glimpse of her racing through the trees. With the swiftness of a cinema "cut back" we are made acquainted with her mother; the author reverts to HAZEL again and then we meet her father, ABEL, the harper, the maker of wreaths and coffins, the keeper of bees and the gatherer of honey.

You will have gathered by this much that *Gone to Earth* is a story of unusual persons in an unusual setting. That is only qualifiedly true. HAZEL WOODUS is for certain an unusual heroine, but the other people of the tale are instantly recognizable. Her father, the minister and the squire who contend for her; Mrs. MARSTON, the minister's mother, an epitome of old women everywhere; even ANDREW VESONS of Undern, with his hatred of women and his fierce affection for gardeners' tasks, are in their breathing lifelikeness straight out of the English countryside. They are put before us with exquisite and unobtrusive humor and understanding. There is fun in this book; make no mistake about that. There is comprehension, which is of far more importance; and there is the power to convey, which is most important of all.

## Her People Self-Revelatory.

The author does not make the blunder of continually telling you what her people are like and asking you to swallow her account on faith, as it were. She is sufficiently objective. In general she pursues the perfect method of letting her folk

reveal themselves in what they say and in what they do. And that is convincing. Nothing is so convincing as behavior, a fact that many novelists never master and a fact that others, like ARNOLD BENNETT, too frequently either forget or deliberately disregard.

On exceptional occasions Miss WEBB permits herself a brief explanation, as in the matter of Mrs. MARSTON and HAZEL when marriage between the girl and the young minister impended:

"It was characteristic of Mrs. MARSTON's class and creed (united with the fact that she was EDWARD's mother) that she did not consider HAZEL in the matter. HAZEL's point of view, personality, hopes and fears were non-existent to her. HAZEL would be absorbed into the Marston family like a new piece of furniture. She would be provided for without being consulted; it would be seen to that she did her duty, also without being consulted. She would become, as all the other women in this and the other families of the world had, the servant of the china and the electroplate and the furniture, and she would be the means by which EDWARD's children came into the world. She would, when not incapacitated, fetch shawls. At all times she would say 'Yes, dear,' or 'As you wish, EDWARD.' With all this before her what did she want with personality and points of view? Obviously nothing."

Mrs. MARSTON is setting forth on a trip to town, an event:

"The slow cortege came down the path, MARTHA being obliged, as the descent grew steeper, to fling herself back like a person in a tug of war, for Mrs. MARSTON gathered way as she went, and uttered little helpless cries.

"I'm going, MARTHA! I'm losing control! Not by the bugles, MARTHA! Not by the braid!"

This was lest the faithful servant, acting as brake, should rip the adornments from Mrs. MARSTON's best mantle.

## A Credible Story.

The main action of the story is the struggle between REDDIN of Undern and EDWARD MARSTON, the minister, over HAZEL. And it is a struggle that will stir the keenest apprehension in the reader. Some phases of it he will likely greet with incredulity until a little reflection has shown him that the behavior of EDWARD MARSTON toward HAZEL is strictly comparable with the behavior of ANGEL CLARE toward Mr. HARDY's unhappy *TESS*. No man who knows anything of the world will gainsay for a moment the existence in it of men like EDWARD MARSTON—men as honestly deluded, as self-sacrificing, as compassionate, finally as fearless—any more than he will question the hard reality of JACK REDDIN, whose place at Undern might have been built, brick by brick and stone by stone, in the imagination of Mr. MAURICE HEWLETT. Curious what a likeness in its imaginative wealth and pictorial fancy this novel bears to Mr. HEWLETT at his best—to the HEWLETT of *The Forest Lovers*, let us say. Though of course there is no brooding of mediæval tapestries in *Gone to Earth*; the mediævality exists here quite exclusively in the minds and hearts of REDDIN and the people of the background, of the world at large as represented by the CLOMBERS and Mr. JAMES and all the rest of the hunting breed of mankind.

## The Luck of Genius.

How is it that such a rare and priceless book as *Gone to Earth* gets overlooked? It is one of those lamentable accidents that are always happening, and not more in respect of books than of people. How many geniuses never get their chance? Is it surprising that in a world where unquestionably men and women live and die without any one so much as suspecting the stuff that is in them—is it surprising that in a world governed by chance or by laws whose operation we do not understand a masterpiece should escape for a time unnoticed, for a time or forever?

MARY WEBB has been fortunate. In the case of a writer like HARDY with a number of volumes to his credit there could be no overlooking of *Tess*, there could be at the worst only misunderstanding, temporary depreciation, withheld recognition. In the case of a MARY WEBB oblivion was fatally likely; oblivion is hardly the word either, since it implies forgetfulness, and a world that has never noticed can have nothing to forget.

But all that is past now; *Gone to Earth* will be read, it will be remembered. Its author is assured of something more than mere notice hereafter. She has kindled expectations that she dare not disappoint if, as we sincerely believe, she has it in her again and again to fulfil them.